

The Remembrance

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Summary: One hazy night. One blurred instant. A sensitive predicament that needs to be resolved between Squall and Quistis.

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"ZELL!!!"

Her raspy voice echoed resoundingly throughout the cafeteria. It's been a slow day. Two hours past lunch time, and cafeteria team leader Rica Stepanicci has counted only about six or seven students who trooped to the counter for their regular mid-day meal. The usual rowdy crowd and lengthy lines didn't rear their ugly heads to terrorize her colleagues for a serving of the scrumptious and normally scarce Balamb Garden hot dogs. Not that she's surprised by the rare occurrence. It is, after all, the first day of the much-awaited Garden Festival, the much ballyhooed, and very frequently postponed event that finally saw its realization through the unmatched dedication of a certain SeeD standout, Selphie Tilmitt.

It is supposed to be a joyous occasion. And for most of the Balamb cadets, it is just that. But Rica can't help but wonder at the sight that met her barely over an hour ago. The usually bubbly Selphie, displaying a rather gloomy mood as she walked in. The petit mercenary simply scanned the vastness of the cafeteria before strutting out with the same sullen disposition. It's not an everyday occurrence, especially coming from one renowned for her sprightly attitude and easy-going ways.

Dismissing the queer instance, Rica went back to her chore of

carefully arranging the hot dogs in a neat stack. She smiled, amused at the perennial sight of another Seed known for his insatiable addiction to the Balamb delicacy. Well, at least now the long-suffering cafeteria top-brass won't have to put up with Zell's frustrated demeanor whenever she tells him that there's not more hot dogs left. This time, he can help himself to his heart's desire. She didn't wait long before Zell showed his lean form by the entrance to the cafeteria.

"Hey Rica" was all he said in response to her rabid call. Rica's lively face transmogrified to a look of perplexity as Zell, apparently unmindful of the hot dogs, gaited past her to check out the nearly empty establishment before walking out anew.

"What's going on here?" the dumbfounded cafeteria head wondered.

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> <p>Irvine finished counting to twenty before removing his protective gas mask. Unloading the empty magazine from the Exeter, he slowly lowered it on the counter in front of him before bending down to pick up one of the spent shells of the experimental, upgraded Dark Ammo littering the padded floor of the firing range.<p>

"Miniature Doomtrains" he thought while pondering on the augmented potency of the test bullet. Irvine abruptly turned around when the door made a whistling sound as it opened to allow Rinoa to enter the chamber.

"So what did she say?" the gunman echoed. Rinoa sighed heavily before responding.

"Damn I can't understand why Quisty had to do this."

Irvine reverted to his silence as he slapped a fresh clip full of Fast Ammo in his rifle. He nonchalantly aimed at the human shaped target and unloaded fifty-two rounds within a span of ten seconds, drawing a pattern of a sad face in the process.

"Maybe you can convince her to change her mind" Rinoa echoed.

"Nah, already tried. She's as stubborn as a mule." The Galbadian shot back before loading two rounds of Demolition Ammo directly into the Exeter's chamber. "Well Quistis, it's been fun."

Rinoa turned her head away while covering her ears when the Canister Shot demolished a sturdy adamantium wall. Her eyes consequently widened when she caught a glimpse of Squall walking past the firing range.

"Squall!" she hollered to catch his attention, but he just glanced back at her before continuing on his way. Irvine likewise noticed their commander's weird mood.

"Hmm, he seems to be taking this much harder than the rest of us."

"Yeah" Rinoa muttered. "I I'm sure gonna miss her I wish she didn't have to go."

"Me too" Irvine softly replied. "But whatever it is, I'm certain Quisty has a good reason for doing this."

* * *

> <p>"Squall, I want my MiniMog card back!"<p>

The frantic holler fell on deaf ears as the absent-minded SeeD commander ignored him. Deciding to confront him later, the junior classman Rowan King went on to continue his daily jogging regimen.

Squall feels sad. He's certain of it. He definitely abhors the thought of seeing Quistis leave. So what in the world could possibly be causing him to hate himself this way? He asks, knowing full well the answer to his nagging question.

TWO MONTHS AGO

He didn't know what came over him when he agreed to join Selphie's Garden Festival committee. Perhaps he wasn't thinking clearly back then, probably because of the excitement for passing the SeeD exam. Now, with nothing else to do with his time, he's hard pressed to fulfill his word. He was pondering on these very thoughts when Balamb Garden's resident musician Arturo Hagel approached to hand him a list of guest performers from all over the world that he needed to contact. Squall frowned as he grabbed the piece of paper.

"What's this???" he snapped when he saw Rinoa's name on the list.

"Yeah, this is so cool!" the boy with the head band replied. "People have been clamoring for Rinoa to do a number of Eyes on Me', probably because they know that she's Julia Heartilly's daughter. Didn't think at first that she'd agree but"

He had to restrain himself for lashing out at Arturo. Though irate beyond belief, Squall reminded himself of the utter rudeness of letting out his frustration on the unfortunate soul standing in front of him. He knows Arturo. And while the SeeD commander often becomes irritated around his presence, the other, more sensitive side of him demanded to give the C-grade cadet who has already failed two SeeD exams "prior to his parents' departure from Balamb" a long overdue break. For all his shortcomings, Arturo does not deserve to be humiliated by anyone.

"Do you know where she is?" Squall retorted with a softer tone.

"Yeah. She's with the band at the quad, practicing." Arturo continued as Squall hurriedly dashed off. "You should hear her sing! She's awesome!"

Squall was furious. Notwithstanding the fact that it's for a good cause, this is the first time Rinoa ever decided on something without consulting him first in the last year that they've been steady. Though he's not the type to be possessive, Squall nevertheless felt that she should at least have told it herself. His rapid pace abruptly slowed when he heard an extremely soothing resonance as he neared the quad.

There were about thirty people in the quad, not including the band and Rinoa herself. Normally, the place would have been bustling with various activities geared towards preparing for the Garden Festival; a scenario that would be in direct contrast to the one he's currently gawking at.

Everyone was still, stunned speechless and hopelessly enchanted by the immensely sweet voice of the sky-blue garbed lass rendering a touching rehearsal number of the song immortalized by her late mother. Squall's irate mood consequently disintegrated when he too was mesmerized by the deeply moving voice of the woman he loves. He silently lashed at himself for his intent of taking out on Rinoa the annoying frustrations he had been enduring for the most part of the day. As he stared lovingly at her, he can't help but whisper heartfelt words of gratitude to some unknown deity for making his path cross with hers.

Then his eyebrows met once again. As soon as Rinoa concluded her song, at least three gentlemen made their way up the stage to personally express their admiration. He felt his teeth clash when one of them, whom he recognized as the bumbling Timber resident who once gave Rinoa a Potion for a gift, landed a kiss on her cheeks. He felt plumes of smoke emanating from his ears as the others followed suit. Had he been less prudent, he would already have sliced all of them to pieces with the Lionheart.

Later, Squall was making his way to the dorms, en route to a confrontation with his girlfriend. His left eyebrow elevated when he tried to turn the door knob only to discover it locked. Using the spare key that Rinoa provided him, the irritable SeeD commander opened the door, only to be met by the most perturbing sight of dozens of flower bouquets adorning her quarters.

"Dorks!" Squall hollered in his mind as he ran forth.

He later found her in the cafeteria, surrounded by a score of ardent admirers. Rinoa likewise saw him, but she was too immersed with her adoring public that all she was able to do is wave briefly at him. Nearing the edge of his fuse, Squall opted instead to head for the parking lot. It didn't take him more than two hours to traverse the lonely stretch of asphalt between Garden and Balamb town, where he spent the better part of the evening alone in a newly established pub. When he finally left, he was so drunk that he couldn't even remember where he parked the SeeD service car.

"Oh my goodness!" Quistis blurted when she saw her comrade wobbling by the street. She had just arrived from a consultation assignment in Dollet, and was feeling all used up that she was already considering on checking into a hotel instead of driving all the way back to Garden. Running into Squall in that state ultimately made up her mind.

"Geez, Squall! Why did you do this?" she vehemently snapped at him as they slowly made their way towards Balamb Hotel. He was already incoherent, his gurgling resonance rendering her all the more alarmed. In the many years that they worked together, Quistis has never known Squall to have any reason good enough to warrant his getting himself drunk. There's something going on, she surmised while approaching the receptionist.

"Welcome to the lovely Balamb Hotel. Are you going to stay for the night?"

"Yeah" the exhausted instructor retorted. "Just give us whatever is available."

It seemed to have taken forever. But finally, they were able to make it to the designated hotel room. Quistis halted abruptly, diffidence getting the better of her after opening the door. Inside the room, there was only one bed.

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> <p>The air smelled especially sweet, a welcome aroma to herald the first streak of sunlight that cast an orange glow through his still heavy eyelids. It's a bit chilly despite the heavy woolen blanket covering his body. Barely eight in the morning, he surmises. Stretching his well-defined left arm momentarily in the air, Squall then slowly lowered it to his right side, rolling his body in the process.<p>

He promptly opened his eyes when his arm felt nothing but the other half of the same woolen blanket covering him and the crumpled cotton sheet lining the wide bed. His eyebrows drew closer, meditating hard on the hazy events that transpired the night before. He then felt a chill down his spine after seeing Quistis emerging from the shower room, furiously drying her blonde hair with the damp towel made of the same soft material as the bath robe she's wearing.

"Quistis? Wh What happened last night?"

She just smiled at him before walking inside the bathroom again. Squall clutched his hangover-besieged head and promptly flopped down the bed once more. When the instructor came out, she was already dressed. Quistis then walked towards him and apathetically tugged on his arms.

"C'mon, sleepyhead. We have to get back to Garden before lunch time."

His head had begun clearing during the ride home. Occasionally, Squall would throw a glance at the driving Quistis, as if trying to perceive what's coursing through her complex mind. She'd notice it every time, but the instructor would almost always opt to ignore his interrogating ogle.

This pattern became prevalent during the rest of the day. Quistis trying her best to avoid circumstances when she could be questioned by the SeeD commander about the previous night's escapades; and Squall feeling an ominous dread growing steadily inside his chest, fearful of the consequences that might arise from his blurry nocturnal tryst with the instructor.

Since then, it was never the same for the two most outstanding SeeDs as far as their relationship with each other is concerned. Both Squall and Quistis became uncomfortable and indifferent with each other. All of the sudden, the vastness of Balamb Garden became barely enough to keep them from feeling high-strung. Something has changed, and they're afraid that this change had just inflicted an

irreversible damage to their friendship.

Which now brings us to the present, with a terribly anguished Squall trying to make sense of all the confusion that's been storming his psyche for the last two months. Though he feels extremely sad at the prospect of not seeing his friend in a very long time, the agitated SeeD leader likewise feels a certain need for this unwelcome event to come to pass.

He's scared. Though he trusts Quistis enough to know that she'd never tell anyone about that night two months prior, he's still petrified with fear of the possibilities. What if someone saw them entering the hotel? Or what if those incorrigible SeeD critics, in their effort to ruin the reputation of the Balamb special forces, uncover that night's secret and make good use of it?

He doesn't really give a damn about the other implications. All he really cares about is Rinoa knowing about it. Though she's not really as narrow-minded as most teenagers, Rinoa is still very much aware of his closeness with Quistis, and her lingering feelings for him. She'd have to be really callous to not make something of it.

And that's exactly what Squall is afraid of. If that ever happens, he stands a pretty good chance of losing Rinoa. And he simply cannot bear the thought.

He's never been more confused in his life. He doesn't want Quistis to leave. But for the sake of his relationship with Rinoa, Squall feels that Balamb Garden has become too small for himself and the instructor. One of them has to go.

Squall's disconcerted musing was interrupted when he noticed where his feet had brought him. He was about to turn back when Quistis opened the door of her quarters and emerged with two huge luggage in tow. She stopped abruptly when their eyes met.

"Hey" Quistis opened. "Come to see me off?"

"I don't think I like your tone." Squall shot back.

"Well, with the way things have been going, can you blame me for thinking that you're happy to see me leave?"

"Hey! That's unfair!" an incensed Squall exclaimed.

"Tell me about it!" an equally irked Quistis snapped back. "I thought we were friends, Squall. I thought I thought you finally welcomed me in your life after everything we went through together."

Squall wasn't able to say anything in response.

"You know, even though I never got what I really wanted from you, I was still happy that we finally came to know each other as friends. I was really happy. But then everything had to change just because of one night. My goodness just one night?"

"I I'm sorry." the SeeD leader finally spoke. "But you have to understand I'm scared. I don't want to lose Rinoa."

Quistis let out a heavy groan.

"You know what it's like to live an empty life? You know how it feels to rely solely on yourself because of fear that no one else would be there for you? I do. You know damn well I do."

"Squall"

"Rinoa gave my life its meaning. She made everything make sense. Quisty, she means the world to me. Even if it was just one night, it may still be enough to destroy everything."

"Squall, listen to me."

"And I can't I just can't accept it. I love her. And I want to stay with her for as long as I can."

"SQUALL."

"WHAT???"

"NOTHING HAPPENED."

Squall felt something explode in his head.

"Say what?"

Quistis bellowed another sigh before reiterating her statement.

"I slept on the couch. Nothing happened."

"Then why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because you never asked?"

"Come on" he softly retorted, giving her a that-answer's-not-good-enough look.

"I don't know. Maybe maybe because for the moment, I wanted to believe that something did happen I wanted YOU to believe that something happened. Pathetic, isn't it?"

Quistis continued when Squall didn't utter a word.

"Load off your mind?"

"So why do you have to go?"

"I have my reasons." She replied while gazing tenderly at her comrade. "Okay it's about my father. I recently received word that he could still be alive. I I have to know if it's true."

"Then why didn't you tell us? Surely we could do something to help you."

"This is a very personal matter for me, Squall. I have to do this by myself alone. I'm sure you understand."

Squall dallied before coming back with a concerned reply. "Will I ever see you again?"

Quistis smiled, though the sadness in her eyes is very evident.
"We're still family, whatever happens. Keep that in mind, okay?"

* * *

> <p>Quistis slowly ran her hand to her chest, as if massaging it to relieve her of the immensely choking heaviness as she made her way to the front gate. Her left shoulder is slightly damp with Selphie's tears.<p>

"Quistis!" a voice rang out just before she boarded the van. She turned around to see Doctor Kadowaki standing by the gate.

She waved, but her eyes were communicating something different as they fixed with a meaningful gaze on the physician. Doctor Kadowaki nodded.

THE END

End
file.